

with disabilities.

Audience members allowing their eyes to search the stage would see a painting by Spirit in the background. Around the edge is a circle in a square and inside it are two sets of legs. Both partners are sitting, and one is massaging the other. Spirit reveals that the hands providing comfort represent a relationship she once had with a partner who died.

In Spirit's words, the painting is, "tangible evidence of someone accepting and loving my body just as it is."

When Spirit performs, painting, dance and music form a separate world, rich in tones, nuances and meaning. Definitions blur; full possibilities come to the forefront as the lights fadeout.

### Mark Brose

**B**LUESY GUITAR MUSIC accompanied by occasional harmonica resonates across the theatre as Rachel and Mark dance. The piece alters between various emotions and head spaces, much the way a relationship does, especially once partners evolve from idealized figures and exhibit qualities such as helplessness and vulnerability. Mark is the dancer with multiple sclerosis but Rachel, portrays helplessness and the barriers depicted often seem insurmountable.

Later in the dance, with the two of them on the floor – the wheelchair unused in the background – Rachel and Mark lie isolated, away from one another, their bodies curled in the fetal position.

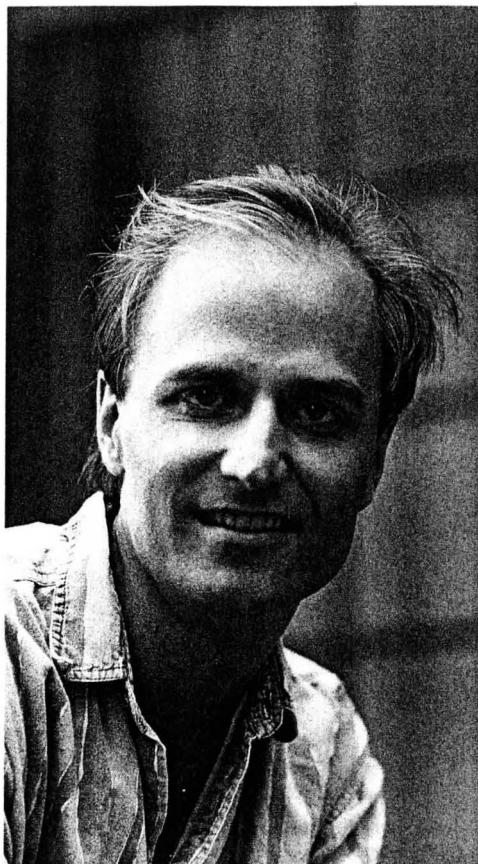
Somewhere along the line – several times in fact – the role of the wheelchair changes from being an obstacle, to a prop, to having no role at all.

Rachel, lying on her back, places the soles of her feet under Mark's stomach. They hold hands and Mark's legs reach out. The move is awe-inspiring for its sheer beauty, but this specific move, which Mark calls "aeroplane, is all about fun and freedom, encountering a space where, before this dance, I had not been since I was eight years old. It's a beautiful moment, which unfortunately did not read to the audience (the first time we did it), because their perception of disability... was that I would fall. Whoever

in the audience reads it as a scary moment – that's fine. And whoever reads it as a joyful moment – that's fine too."

Throughout the piece Mark and Rachel's characters explore insecurity, comfort and sensuality in each other. Towards the end, an overhead image of a canoe subtly flashes across the background. Moments later, as lights fade, the dance ends with Mark Brose in a canoe and Rachel Gorman leaning against him.

"The story," Mark explains, "is about a couple who are learning about each other... and discovering what freedoms and limitations they each have. We're also dealing with common perceptions of couples where one person uses a wheelchair.



**D**ANCE FOR PEOPLE with physical disabilities is starting to develop in Canada. It has already gained momentum in the United States under the leadership of Mary Verdi Fletcher, a dancer with spina bifida, who founded *Dancing Wheels* in 1980, with the support of the Cleveland ballet.

Recently Frank Hull received a week-long scholarship to take a *Dancing Wheels* workshop in Cleveland. In Frank's word, he "fell in love with *Dancing Wheels*."

But dancers with disabilities wishing to study in Cleveland face many issues. It is hard to get permission for foreigners to work legally in the States. Frank Hull, being part Aboriginal Canadian, had no legal problem working there; however he did have problems with accessible housing and health coverage which both represent significant challenges to people with disabilities in the United States.

As for the theatre scene in Toronto, there are very few accessible spaces. Artword Theatre and Betty Olliphant where these performances took place are among the few. Spirit Synott and Mark Brose developed their techniques at a dance workshop at the Toronto Theatre Alliance. Perhaps the biggest barrier in Canada, like any issue related to disability, has to do with attitudes. Dancing is not a gentle art. Dancers with or without disabilities get injured regularly: pulled muscles, dislocated shoulders, charley horses... they are all part of the job. The tendency in our society is to be overprotective of people with disabilities. As with anything else, there is a balance that needs to be made, where all dancers can make individual decisions about which limitations can realistically be challenged.

"I'm proud of my rug-burns. I'm proud of my injuries," Frank Hull boasts.

"The chair's not so fragile and neither am I," Spirit says matter-of-factly.

"I'm just having a great time," Mark admits.

With time, dancers with disabilities will develop an audience in Canada. Spirit and Mark performed their pieces with the Fringe Festival of Independent Dance Artists; the

responses were incredibly positive. As new possibilities emerge for people with disabilities in the workforce, why shouldn't professional dancers be a part of that?

*Mordecai Drache is a freelance writer living in Toronto, ON.*